

## A sideways glance – being on an editorial board for 25 years: personal and theological reflections

Alistair Ross

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## A sideways glance – being on an editorial board for 25 years: personal and theological reflections

Alistair Ross

Kellogg College, University of Oxford, UK

### ABSTRACT

This theological reflection is based on 25 years of membership of being on the editorial board of the first *CONTACT*, now *Practical Theology*. Autoethnographic in style it focuses on the key role of theological reflection and how *Practical Theology* models and encourages how people can become practical theologians. This includes conscious and unconscious elements focussing on the development of an individual theology alongside key events from each person's past. Theological reflection emerges out of this personal context, but which is enhanced by being in touch with other practical theologians in varying stages of their development. To this end, *Practical Theology*, and *CONTACT* before it, offered a place to belong, a community of people engaged in shared endeavours. This is vital in times of complex social, political and spiritual change. As knowledge advances, in such areas as neuroscience, these can be allied to the rich heritage of pastoral traditions held in practical theology. There is the potential for a new dimension of theological reflection.

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## Introduction

The jewel in the crown of *Practical Theology* is the sheer breadth, depth and multiplicity of theological reflection the journal offers. Such reflection is creative, diverse, and innovative driven by the commitment of people working out theology in real-life contexts, as well as students on doctoral training courses finding their voice for the first time. This is vitally important for the health of the discipline and one that has been in constant evolution for the 25 years I have been on the editorial board. I can foresee this continuing with the invaluable commitment of the editor and other members of the editorial board in supporting first-time authors, and those for whom English is not their first language.

What follows are some psychodynamically-informed autoethnographic theological reflections with include past, present, and future dimensions.

At crucial times in my career as a Baptist minister, academic, writer, and therapist, I have been so helped by people willing to take a risk on me. Yet I can still recall the deep feelings of rejection I experienced from submitting an article for the first time in

**CONTACT** Alistair Ross  [alistair.ross@kellogg.ox.ac.uk](mailto:alistair.ross@kellogg.ox.ac.uk)

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the 1990s. I hasten to add this was not *Contact* or *Practical Theology*. In hindsight what I needed was an editor or peer-reviewer to help me navigate this wholly new process and guide me in making the minor adjustments required rather than the flat rejection I received. In my article, I had unknowingly touched on a politically-sensitive area in psychoanalysis which some wise counsel could have helped me avoid. I can also see that unconsciously I had set up a scenario where I would be rejected which fitted with the pattern of my early life (Ross 1997). I also know that others will find the support I did not as the future of *Practical Theology* involves maintaining its continuing balance of risk and creativity with an eye to the future, not just the past.

There are still obstacles ahead but no more than those encountered in the past. In part, this relates to the sheer complexity of the discipline of theology. I am sure there must be some apocryphal saying that goes, 'If you want ten different opinions all you have to do is to put two theologians in a room and tell them to agree, before exiting and locking the door'. My 13-year-old son was doing his religious education homework on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He was having some difficulty so asked for help. I explained about God existing as three Persons, but there only being one God. I stopped short of reflecting on the concept of perichoresis (Fiddes 2000), which was just as well, as I wasn't sure I really understood it myself. He turned to me and said with incredulity, 'Dad, there is no way anyone is ever going to believe that'. So, theology has many challenges in explaining first what it is, second why one should believe it, and third how it functions in practice. Theology needs to be continually redefining itself to find new forms of communication in every generation that maintains links to the past while being encountered in the present, but with a desire to look to the future. This dynamic offers a unique role for pastoral or practical theology. From British and Irish perspectives these terms have generally been used interchangeably, while in European (especially German) and North American perspectives practical theology has a much longer standing in the academy. It was the dream of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the German theologian and philosopher, who believed that practical theology was to be a discipline in its own right, rather than simply being the application of theology to practice.

I joined in the editorial board in 2000 when the journal was named *Contact: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Pastoral Studies*. This was originally sponsored by a consortium of small Christian-based pioneering organisations including the Clinical Theology Association (later the Bridge Pastoral Foundation) that I was Director of at that time. When I moved into an academic career at a university running a Master's degree in Psychodynamic Therapy, I simply stayed on the editorial board, a bit like the last guest to leave a party in the wee hours of the morning. Before going further it is important to set these reflections in a context. In 2020 when the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology (BIAPT) celebrated its 25th anniversary, *Practical Theology* (sponsored by BIAPT from 1999) devoted two issues to telling this history through several reflective, sequential narratives. In 'Soil, Roots and Shoots' Lyall and Ballard (2020) looked at the past while Roberts takes the story on in 'Keeping Contact: traditions and trajectories of British and Irish practical theology as evidenced in the history of BIAPT's journal' (2020), supported by other members of the editorial board, Cameron, Rogers, and Slee. His critical evaluation of the journal, and interviews with several of the editors, reveals the continuity between the past and present including themes of creativity, inclusion, dialogue, debate, and with a deep engagement of what it is to be human. *Contact* (the past)

morphs seamlessly into *Practical Theology* (the present) and continues to offer a place of belonging.

Beyond a journal-based community, where does a practical theologian belong? As a 'species' they exist in an in-between liminal place, often too theological for faith communities, forever asking awkward questions and not willing to settle for simple answers. Likewise, they are too practical for purist theological faculties hiding behind the rubric that 'All theology is practical' without any apparent interest to explore how to put this into practice. Dynamic tensions exist in balancing the practical, the professional, and the prophetic, speaking truth to power on our behalf and on the behalf of others. I find this same dynamic work when I attend psychoanalytic events. Being known as a person of faith results in a tacit exclusion based on an implicit atheism found in psychoanalysis which cannot conceive there are other ways of being in the world. At one UK-based psychoanalytic conference on the nature of evil, the convener refused to let me speak in an open session until several other participants pointed this out publicly. However in the relational psychoanalytic world (originating in New York), there is much greater acceptance, and where my paper on 'Guntrip as a Relational Pastoral Theologian' was warmly received. So psychoanalysis like theology comes in many different forms. As my thinking, lived experience, soul/psyche, and identity have evolved I believe that practical theologians inhabit at least two spheres of belonging and being. These are: the consciously constructed practical theologian; and the unconsciously constructed practical theologian.

### **The consciously constructed practical theologian**

Practical theologians are not born with some unique strand of spiritual DNA, nor do they arrive freshly packed from some theological production line. More likely they are constructed from three (or possibly more) boxes of theological Lego, all mixed in together. The sky is the limit depending on the imagination of the constructor and their desire to build. One of the huge changes that have occurred over the last 25 years has been the conscious awareness of just how much we are shaped by so many factors influencing how we feel, think, and imagine. We all have our personal psychological and spiritual fair-ground Hall of Mirrors within us, all with the potential for a distorting gaze or reflection that we once accepted as reality. Such shaping factors include: class, birth order, sibling rivalry, health, illness, schooling, traumas, absences, neglect, not being 'seen', race, xenophobia, religion, spirituality, nationality, colonialism, gender, sexuality, disability, intellect and so the list goes on. 'What we find are not private and isolated egos calling out to each other across an empty abyss but a preformed set of postures, meaning, languages, roles, values-the "always already thereness of the interpersonal"' (Hodgson 1994, 203).

### **A personal past**

I have been profoundly shaped by my austere post-War Scottish origins, growing up in an inner-city tenement to poor, white, working-class parents in Glasgow. I am not saying it was a tough area, but at the age of five I was to be enrolled in a judo class learning how to protect myself. Equally, I have been shaped by being a dizygotic twin as opposed to a singleton. These facts do not make me special, better or worse or than anyone else but they do influence how I feel, think and act as a practical theologian in my interpersonal

engagement with others. In many ways, a practical theologian is like the work of Catalan architect Antoni Gaudi (1852–1926), exemplified in his unique and unfinished Basilica de la Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. He combines neo-Gothic, Oriental, and Art Nouveau in his own transcendental Modernism. The work is on-going, as too am I.

So, the first task of any practical theologian is to identify what their lived theology is, rather than what they were originally taught, and what components they build together. What seemed so clear in the lecture-room of a theological college or academic institution becomes opaque when encountering the real lives and traumas of the people that we try to support in many different capacities, formal and informal. The nature of theology as I understand it is to take the human subject, with inner and outer worlds of mystery, wonder, trauma and failure, and move beyond limited self-understandings towards a transcendent infinite Other, in the divine Being encountered as God. This requires paradoxically both a revealing, a relational making known through texts, traditions, and experiences, in tension with an unconcealing. Unconcealing is an entering into the truth of our being with the creation of an intra-psychic space of possibility. In Levinas's words, 'the coming of God to mind' leads to an 'updwelling of the human being within'. (1998, ix). Part of that updwelling can be seen in the childhood game of hide-and-seek offering a theological metaphor about how people reflect and discern the image of God in themselves. It is through play, which the British psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott saw as an essential aspect of our discovery of the human psyche. Following Moltmann, we are invited into God's presence in the knowledge we can discover more of self and Other through acts of imaginative and creative playfulness, psychologically, physically and spiritually. Part of that unconcealing is a profound part of any mystical encounter, where that encounter is difficult to put into words, but deeply felt. This in turn enables new engagements with others in the shape of a liberating and radical inclusivity reflecting the God that is encountered. A community of belonging comes into being which offers a sustaining narrative for people's lives. It offers and lives out stories which as Rowan Williams argues, "All good stories change us if we hear them attentively, the most serious stories change us radically." The biblical narratives do not aim to entertain but to engage us, to liberate and transform us' (Migliore 1991, 34). This fits with the best tradition, person, and foundational paradigm of Jesus found in the Gospels and worked out through the rest of the New Testament. This trajectory of a commitment to the other is expressed in contemporary terms through the French Jewish philosopher Levinas (1906–1995), despite his ideas being elliptical and elusive (see also Morgan 2018 and Orange 2011). This has become my under-pinning, evolving, though rarely-articulated vision and hermeneutic through being on the editorial board of first *Contact*, then *Practical Theology*.

### Social and spiritual contexts

*Contact* was first produced in 1960 at a time when the Church and other faith communities were bewildered and battered on every side. Into this cacophony, new voices emerged with pastoral care and pastoral theology drawing on the emerging field of counselling, and the already established fields of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy. As people encountered a cultural shift towards the individual and their experience, counselling was at the cutting-edge of change and seemed a good partner to work with. So, *Contact* gave voice to new ways of living out faith and theology in

practice. At this stage, it was almost exclusively Christian and pre-dominantly Anglican or Presbyterian in focus, with a smattering of Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Non-conformist contributions along the way. The ethos was predominately pastoral relating to pastoral, ministerial, and chaplaincy roles as the contexts of reflection.

The sociologist and social theorist Anthony Giddens (1991) drew attention to how technology changes individuals and communities. The self is ever-evolving and requires the need to generate a narrative that sustains people through such changes, wanted and unwanted, that come. It may be difficult for current readers to imagine, but the context was a world with no personal computers, no internet, and no search-engines. Finding out what was going on in any discipline was a slow and complicated process. It required intentionality in order to gain information or make something happen. It was personal and relational. It meant: going to conferences; listening to speakers and attending events; writing letters to people to engage in dialogue; cultivating networks of people; and most importantly reading journals. *Contact* had an energy that emanated from its very pages. It felt much more radical and gave a sense of being on the cutting-edge of something that wasn't quite defined. More than that it offered a community of belonging. It introduced the reader to key thinkers and like-minded practitioners in pastoral care, pastoral counselling and pastoral theology.

My time at theological college was challenging although I am not sure I was the easiest student. The idea of discovering one's own voice was seen as rebellious, rather than the fostering of individuality, where the status quo was to conform. The irony that this was a non-conformist College seemed lost on most of the staff. I found pastoral counselling a great help in enabling me to make important transitions in my internal world, which I was discovering for the first time. Similarly, a chaplaincy placement and on-going work at a psychiatric hospital where I was a member of the chaplaincy team offered a paradigm shift. The people I encountered, and the stories they told, were of complicated lives of abuse, trauma, neglect, and pain. These experiences did not sit easily with any conservative theology. I began searching for theological and other resources to enable me to make sense of the disconnect between what I was being taught and what I was experiencing. What I unearthed was: *Contact*, where I encountered others who were wrestling with similar issues such as John Foskett; Frank Lake's *Clinical Theology* (1966); and psychoanalysis in the writings of Harry Guntrip, a Congregational minister and psychoanalyst who taught Frank Lake, as well as Donald Winnicott, a non-conformist psychoanalyst shaped by his Methodist upbringing. One upshot of this was finding my own voice expressed in a narrative form, *Evangelicals in Exile: Wrestling with Theology and the Unconscious* (Ross 1997). When this was reviewed and highlighted in the *Baptist Times*, the most traditional member of staff at the theological college, stuck somewhere in the 1950s, described it as gutter-journalism. He could not cope with a world that had moved on, or the thought that theology could be practical aside for the historic ordinances of the Church. *Practical Theology* is a testament to just how social and spiritual contexts have changed and need to be engaged with in order for the dynamic nature of the discipline to be continued.

### **A dynamic and unfolding present**

In recent years I have worked on my understanding and experience of race, what it is to inhabit being white with power, how to identify the seductions of power, and enhance

my limited vision of what it is to be with people of colour. This has been a relational engagement through a friend and colleague, Prof Anthony Reddie and his writings, most recently on James Cone (Reddie 2022). Yet Antony's influence is not simply around issues of race and colour, as I have re-connected with a suppressed part of my early theological engagement on liberation theology. At a time when I faced a fork in the road of life, Freud and psychoanalysis won out, as if it was that part of my psyche that needed liberating first. As a therapist, I see these issues emerge weekly in the lives of my clients (Ross 2019). Clients come with their consciously constructed life when something is no longer working. They often want a quick fix, not realising that there are many more lives to examine within them. Part of a therapist's role is to offer another gaze, another perspective, a new opportunity for the person to be seen beyond their distortions. The challenge is that the client's story brings insights and challenges to the therapist. They can help reveal or at least remind me of my own distortions. Together, client and therapist can form a form of co-constructed intersubjectivity (Ross 2019).

The editorial board is more diverse now that it ever has been, not least because it recognised that nobody is interested in a journal represented by a white, male majority. If this were the case any journal would lose all credibility and fail to deliver on the vision of a practical theology for all. Yet it came through relationality and intentionality. It did not happen by accident, representing the on-going work of editors and the Contact Pastoral Trust's far-sightedness. The long-standing interdisciplinary approach of the journal which has served it well, needs to explore how this can be maintained alongside the emerging foci of intersectionality. By intersectionality, I draw on Crenshaw's (1991) term which offers a frame for understanding the complexity at the intersection of racism, sexism and other spheres explored through diversity and inclusion. It is the cumulative and over-lapping impact that Crenshaw gives new insights into. So addressing one area of difference and diversity is not sufficient in itself. While intersectionality is important there is still a task for the practical theologian to critically examine its core beliefs and value in the light of the other narratives that pastoral theology holds, including their own. The value of theological reflection in practical theology is to give space to explore how peoples' different experiences influence who and what we are, as well as where we belong.

### **The unconsciously constructed practical theologian**

It cannot be assumed that all practical theologians or theologians believe there is an unconscious aspect of being human that forms an important part of who and what we are. By the term unconscious I mean a part of the mind, referred to as the psyche (the German original word also means soul), which is more than mental or cognitive thought. Within the psyche there are mental processes at work in contact dynamic flux, existing in drives for creativity, sexuality, survival, and destructiveness. Some of this we are aware of and some of which we are unaware of. Freud saw the functioning of the psyche including processes, such as repression, that limit our mental awareness of what is going on until they emerge in dreams, projections, slips of the tongue, and so on. Repression can lead us to make the same mistakes again and again. Freud says it is the root cause of psychological illness (Ross 2019). The idea of the unconscious is what makes every human being mysterious, especially to ourselves. Like a locked-room murder mystery, we are a complex puzzle looking for an answer and often a guilty

party. Of course, we are the guilty party, and it is a part of ourselves that we have ‘killed’ off through repression and denial. Yet that part won’t stay dead, and emerges as if in some form of psychic resurrection, without the theological overtones. So how does the unconscious feature in our becoming a practical theologian? There are two areas we can explore.

### Neuroscience and neuropsychanalysis

To this, we can turn to findings from neuroscience and more particularly neuropsychanalysis. For the uninitiated, it is like jumping into shark-infested water with claims and counter-claims. Hard-core scientists want to stick purely to the science of the brain and eschew making generalisations, while populists seem to make generalisations to support almost everything. A good place to start is through the work of two writers. Firstly, the philosopher and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist chart a guide through some aspects of the brain in his seminal *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (2009). Secondly, the neuropsychologist and psychoanalyst Mark Solms in his *The Hidden Spring: A journey to the Source of Consciousness* (2021).

The heart problem of consciousness is said to be the biggest unsolved puzzle of contemporary neuroscience, if not also science. The solution proposed ... is a radical departure from conventional approaches. Since the cerebral cortex is the seat of intelligence, almost everybody thinks that it is the seat of consciousness. I disagree; consciousness is far more primitive than that ... This is the “hidden spring” ... consciousness in its elemental form, namely *raw feeling*, is a surprisingly simple function. (2012, 4)

The key headline is that feelings come before thoughts in human consciousness. To be human is to feel deeply, becoming emotionally alive in the first order. To think, understand, and contain such primitive impulses is a second order, although equally important.

Theology as a discipline has often been overly intellectual based on our thinking about God rather than our experience of God. If it is true that our feelings states are the most primitive part of the brain, it is these that need to be recognised in some way in order for us to be fully human, as well as reflecting on what this means being made in the image of God. Solms states,

Feeling is a precious inheritance. It carries within it the wisdom of the ages: an inheritance that extends backwards over aeons to the beginning of life itself. ... Feelings enable us to do what is best for us, even as we do not know *why* we do so ... it actually comes spontaneously from our inmost interior. It dawns within us even before we are born. At its source, we are guided by a constant stream of feelings, flowing from a wellspring of intuition, arising from we do not where. Each of us individually does not know the causes, but we feel them. Feelings are a legacy that the whole history of life has bestowed upon us, to steel us for the uncertainties to come. (2021, 299).

So to be a practical theologian involves an engagement with deep, internal feeling states about our existence rather than acquiring a theological qualification, important as that is, or simply acquiring techniques of theological reflection, which are also equally important. This requires increasingly sophisticated forms of theological reflection. Thompson, Pattison, and Thompson (2008) coined the acronym PTR ‘Progressing Theological Reflection’ in adopting creative ways of exploring thinking and feeling for theological reflection.

Another aspect of a deep theological engagement with such feeling states can be found in mysticism. This has such rich resonances across all religious traditions and while this is reflected on from time to time in *Practical Theology* there are many other avenues for this to be explored and expressed. Yet it should not be ignored (Sheldrake 2022).

### Reading practical theology and the unconscious

While I am aware that the unconscious is a disputed concept by some, positing its existence offers intriguing frameworks for examining life, the life that we are aware of, and the life we are unaware of, until it becomes present. One of Freud's ideas is that there is no time in the unconscious. This is why an event or memory from our past can make an urgent, and often unwelcome intrusion into a present-day experience. Yet it brings with it the emotions, thoughts and feelings we associated with it at the time. Depending on the age we were we may not have had a sufficient emotional vocabulary available. In such cases these feelings, often traumatic, get embodied. We live with them not always aware. We may be in a position to do something different about it now, but this means every act of theological reflection has a rich, and reparative potential.

So if the unconscious is unconscious how do people work with this? As a psychodynamic therapist, there are ways involving dreams, the use of transference, counter-transference and discerning projective identification (Ross 2019), but what about as a practical theologian? One simple technique is to read *Practical Theology* with an eye to seeing other things, or attending to one's feeling states encountered when reading. So often students or academics read texts with the intent of extracting information compounded by time pressures and deadlines. It is a difficult habit to get out of. So in a rather more meditative way begin by reading an article in *Practical Theology* but before rushing away afterwards, look through the pages, in paper or online, and adopt a free association form of reading. Pick a volume from your bookshelf and look through it in a random fashion. Find an article that 'calls' you or make you 'feel' you want to read more. In reading one article, ask yourself some questions at the end of each page, even if the argument is not complete, 'What feelings does this stir in me? Where does my mind wander to? What connections does this make to my past and my present'.

Having just written this I randomly picked out one volume of *Practical Theology* from my bookshelf. These are not in date order and without my reading glasses on I could not read the time of publication. It happened to be vol. 3: 3 (2010). Even as I read the Contents my thoughts and feelings were stimulated. It was edited by Zoe Bennett and I recall her saying some generous and thoughtful words about an article I wrote for *Practical Theology*. I was left wondering where she is and how she is now, hoping that life is rich for her. There was then an article about the Bridge Pastoral Foundation (BPF, formerly the Clinical Theology Association), that I was Director of for a short time. This was crucially important for me as it formed a transition in my life in moving from being a Baptist minister to becoming a full-time academic. The BPF had such a rich resource of people who gave crucial things to me like acceptance and the courage to follow my feelings. There was another article by a former colleague that I have fallen out with. They have moved away and I have no contact details for them. I felt regret. Sad that I have missed the opportunity to repair something before I too move away. There was an article by Philip

Sheldrake, who I knew briefly, and who have followed in subsequent years through his writings. Not knowing I would read his name, I had already referred to his latest book on mysticism, so my psyche is clearly in a mystical mode. Yet seeing his name led me to realise I had not read his most recent book from 2024 on civility and cultivating public virtues. It was all issues of concern to practical theologians. Lastly, there was an article by Stephen Pattison on spirituality, that was a reminder of how thoughtful his writing is and how important spirituality still is to me. At a time when I often despair of the Church, is felt good to believe that not all is lost. Yet it was also a sense of pain and sadness. Stephen was my doctoral supervisor for whom I have a depth of gratitude in enabling me to complete my PhD, while also doing a full-time academic job, and his unfailing support and challenge. I reflected that I have modelled my style of doctoral supervision on him, so in one sense his tradition has passed on. The sadness is that while Stephen survived a brain aneurysm at the end of 2023, it has left him unable to speak and other issues. I made me realise that I miss him and our curry-nights out talking about theology and putting the world to rights.

Even the reviews section, helpful as they are, link to people from my past. This included John Foskett mentioned earlier, a pioneer in mental health chaplaincy, spirituality, and therapy, who wrote a rich, personal letter about my work of integration. I was deeply touched when he said that I had put into words what he had been wrestling with much of his life. It created a realisation that I am simply connected to a rich 'cloud of witnesses' that have gone before as I in turn seek to pass on to others. Nicola Slee, another valued member of the editorial board, added a review. Nicola was my spiritual director, who with great patience and faith, encouraged my stumbling steps to develop and repair aspects of my spirituality. These relational connections mean that we are not alone. Isolation can be a feeling we avoid looking at, but is often part of our lived experience. So often practical theologians are beaver-ing away balancing so many demands and deadlines. What keeps one engaged in the task, or dare I say 'calling' to be the practical theologians we are is through such connections.

From this reading and reflecting there flowed a spontaneous desire to pray for those who had come to mind, with a thankfulness of what they have contributed to me. There was another feeling, which surprised me, and it was that of obligation. Obligation, in a good way, a debt of gratitude to those who have inter-acted with me in many ways, professionally and personally, and who have contributed to who I am knowingly and unknowingly. That gratitude fuels my desire to offer such support and encouragement to others. So what started out as an intellectual exercise to support a point in an article becomes an alive expression of spirituality. *Practical Theology* can be a place of challenge, unconcealing, comfort, connection, belonging, and encouragement. It can stimulate thinking in new ways, and stir up feelings, some old and some new. It can enhance a lived experience of spirituality and of being in the company of the living and the dead, which allows our on-going living in the service of a theological vision. Long may that, and this journal, continue.

### Disclosure statement

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